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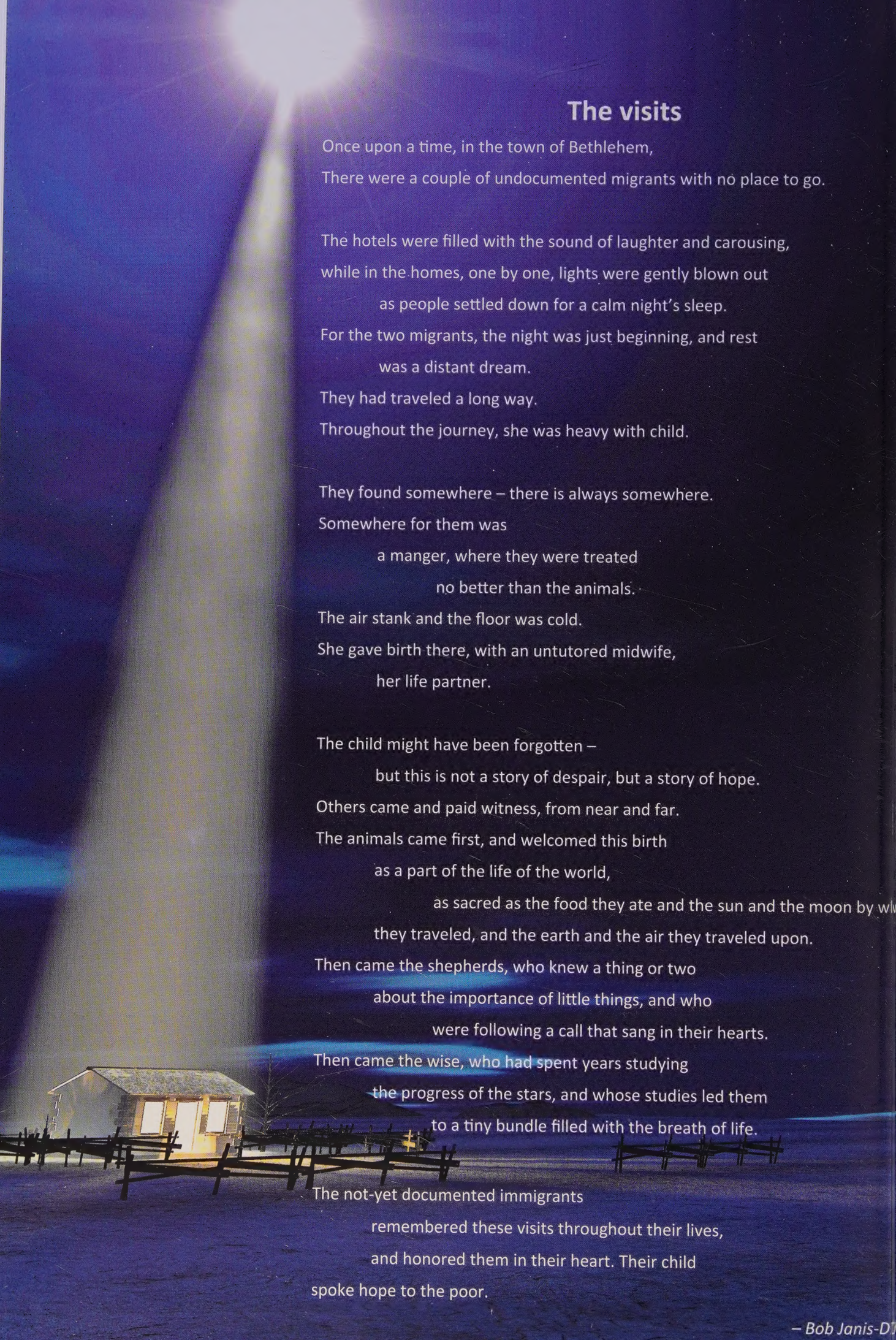
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The INQUIRER

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The voice of British and Irish Unitarians and Free Christians Issue 7904 3 December 2016

A vertical beam of bright light descends from the top center of the page, illuminating a small, simple house with a dark roof and a few windows. The house is situated in a flat, open field under a dark, starry night sky. The light creates a strong contrast between the illuminated area and the surrounding darkness.

The visits

Once upon a time, in the town of Bethlehem,
There were a couple of undocumented migrants with no place to go.

The hotels were filled with the sound of laughter and carousing,
while in the homes, one by one, lights were gently blown out
as people settled down for a calm night's sleep.

For the two migrants, the night was just beginning, and rest
was a distant dream.

They had traveled a long way.

Throughout the journey, she was heavy with child.

They found somewhere – there is always somewhere.

Somewhere for them was

a manger, where they were treated
no better than the animals.

The air stank and the floor was cold.

She gave birth there, with an untutored midwife,
her life partner.

The child might have been forgotten –

but this is not a story of despair, but a story of hope.

Others came and paid witness, from near and far.

The animals came first, and welcomed this birth

as a part of the life of the world,

as sacred as the food they ate and the sun and the moon by which
they traveled, and the earth and the air they traveled upon.

Then came the shepherds, who knew a thing or two

about the importance of little things, and who

were following a call that sang in their hearts.

Then came the wise, who had spent years studying

the progress of the stars, and whose studies led them

to a tiny bundle filled with the breath of life.

The not-yet documented immigrants

remembered these visits throughout their lives,

and honored them in their heart. Their child

spoke hope to the poor.



Photo by Walter Rock via freeimages.com

Sanctuary

The peel of bells and vocal strains
 Around and drown my inner voice.
 All I cannot argue with,
 Full for which I have no choice.
 This building draws me in.

The double doors invite and call,
 The vaulted heights deep and away.
 Push the smooth dizzying columns
 And wander cross the stones, drab grey,
 The indoor paved pathway.

The fuse shattered patterned shapes from
 The windows to my left and right.
 The pale floor gold and red and green,
 The light blurry shapes of liquid light
 Cross my arms and feet.

The annies, fathers, new-borns, partners,
 The spacious benches pause and rest.
 Open to all, young, old or sick.
 Too few, too sparse, all full, none left
 Or yet more weary feet.

Pass through spicy stinging haze,
 I step the dais in my path,
 The shepherds milling aimlessly,
 My lost soul to help and save.
 The ritual needs their skills.

In the corner of each eye I
 See garbed figures stood waiting where
 The grims queue, offerings in hand;
 The be-filled insurance for every prayer
 Under the winter sun.

A multitude of vestries here,
 So many seekers swapping coin
 For guarantees of happiness
 And deliverance from boredom.
 Slow progress to my goal.

But I have lofty aims and now,
 Past ambling flock and cloistered men,
 I find the stairs, the point of all
 My seeking near; ascension then!
 And just a few more steps.
 Up, up and through the open arch,
 A glint of coin, a candle, done.
 Closed eyes, deep breath, a silent prayer.
 Stop shopping, this stress isn't fun.
 Time now to head away.

Out into air and vigilant Grey,
 Our spired squire, watches over these
 Cathedrals of commerce that are
 Turning the gathered masses' tithes
 Of ten to one hundred.

A bus, a key, a shrugged-off coat,
 The promise of sweet sanctuary.
 Forehead on door, closed eyes, deep
 breath,
 A carol greets my assaulted ear
 From the background radio.

'Pull up a pew,' my partner cries,
 His arms wide open for a hug.
 I breathe in spicy warming haze
 As he presents me with steaming mug
 Of welcome, love-blessed tea.

'How's town?' 'Insane,' I sigh reply,
 And wave my purchased candle gift.
 And yet this madness, this crackers
 frenzy,
 Is one experience like all the rest
 We find in human life.

Is God just seeing what it's like
 To be a slave to cloth and till,
 To plastic, leather, batteries?
 To feel the craze, to suffer til

The void inside is either filled
 With temporary things and stuff
 That glitter, delight, but fade away
 And leave you feeling not enough.

Or filled instead with light and love,
 For all of life, for you, for me.
 I see pilgrims seeking wholeness,
 Just seeking it misguidedly.

This quiet space and holy tea
 Have given me wisdom to see
 That everything is divinity
 But not again til next year, please.

— Diana Bebbly

The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER

Established 1842

The Inquirer is the oldest

Nonconformist religious newspaper

"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."

*From the Object passed at the
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Inquiring Words BETHLEHEM

- Bethlehem is wherever a baby is born and wonder-filled parents enjoy the moment.
- Bethlehem is wherever new lives are birthed and nurtured towards independent being.
- Bethlehem is wherever renewed spirit and fresh perspective emerge from out the human shadows.
- Bethlehem is wherever human imagination unfolds into stories and sculptures and symphonies.
- Bethlehem is wherever seeds of peace and renewal are scattered across fields of waste and war.
- Bethlehem is wherever new life sprouts in contexts of death and decay.
- Bethlehem is wherever a generation of old life overlaps with a generation of new.
- Bethlehem is wherever gifts offered with good faith are accepted with thanks and grace.
- Bethlehem is wherever the starry sun rises and 'rests' over our homes.
- Bethlehem is wherever caring innkeepers find room for the needy of refuge and asylum.
- Bethlehem is wherever choirs sing 'Gloria' and bands make joyful noises to the Lord.
- Bethlehem is wherever some new saviour or some new redeemer quietly slips into the world.
- Bethlehem is wherever hope pushes gently through smothering blankets of despair.
- Bethlehem is wherever and whenever ... it was there and then and its here and now.
- Bethlehem is ...

— Andrew M Hill



What has 2000 years of Christmas brought?

By Feergus O'Connor

This Christmas we once again contemplate, in the words of my favourite Unitarian carol, 'the woes of sin and strife the world has suffered long', those 'two thousands years of wrong' which Thomas Hardy sardonically reflected upon in his poem *Christmas 1924*:

'Peace upon Earth!' was said. We sing it

And pay a million priests to bring it.

After two thousand years of Mass

We've got as far as poison gas.

The only progress made in the last century since the First World War, that 'war to end all wars', is not a moral one: it is the scientific barbarism of vastly increased deadliness of our weapons of mass destruction. Our self-professed 'Christian' statesmen proudly glory in their civilising wars of liberation and pre-emptive onslaughts of 'shock and

awe' on Muslim lands not in the deployment of poison gas but nuclear arsenals, depleted uranium causing random injuries and long-term incapacity to its victims and fiendishly cruel cluster bombs which blind, maim and kill innocent children long after their wars have ended. In the words of Tacitus: 'They make a desert and they call it peace'.

At this season of universal goodwill let us hold in our loving thoughts the suffering people of Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Gaza. We hope and pray that hatred and violence can be overcome and that we in the West may repent of our involvement in their sufferings through the misguided policies of our politicians and the machinations of our arms merchants, whose trade is insanely subsidised by us as taxpayers.

We cannot but share the dejected mood of the Unitarian poet Longfellow as he heard the Christmas bells in his native New England while the American Civil War raged:

And in despair I bowed my head:

'There is no peace on Earth', I said.

'For hate is strong

And mocks the song:

Goodwill to all and peace on Earth!'

Must not any moral individual who, in this triumphal age of Trump and Brexit demagogues, passionately cares for the dream of international peace and global human solidarity share Longfellow's mood of despair in the face of such criminal folly and heart-breaking cruelty?

As we look around the world today on our television screens and see the lasting legacy of hatred, bitterness and resentment caused by the war in Iraq, the desperate plight of Palestinians suffering the effects of occupation for almost half a century, the despair of millions of Syrians, not only in their devastated country but in the refugee camps, and the continued sufferings of the people of Iraq and Afghanistan must we not become more than ever convinced that, for the sake of our children and grandchildren, the long term survival on this fragile planet and of our common humanity, there must be a better way?

That nobler path and that better world can be brought about only by a genuine change of heart, such a spiritual



Marley's ghost visits Scrooge in 'A Christmas Carol'. John Leech illustration.

transformation as that experienced by the regenerate Scrooge in Dickens's Christmas parable *A Christmas Carol*: a realisation of the illimitable worth and dignity of every human being and indeed of all God's sentient and suffering creatures who share this planet with us. To those here-today-and-gone-tomorrow politicians who launch illegal, immoral and dangerous wars we should quote those words addressed to Ebenezer Scrooge:

'Will you decide what men shall live, what men shall die? It may be in the sight of Heaven, you are more worthless and less fit to live than this poor man's child...'

The moral of *A Christmas Carol* is clearly not for one season only: it is a perennial one. Its message of universal benevolence to all our fellow men and women of every class, race and creed

is one that can never fail to move and inspire. *A Christmas Carol* has arguably done more good than any other work of imaginative literature in history. In these times of fear, insecurity and strife its wisdom and humanity have surely never been more sorely and desperately needed?

Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin and Theresa May, who boasted that she would press the nuclear button, might read this secular sermon and also profitably heed these words of the Talmud: 'One who destroys a single life is deemed ... to have destroyed an entire world and one who saves a single life is deemed to have saved an entire world'. A fundamental religious teaching echoed in the Qur'an: 'Who has killed one innocent soul, it is as if he has killed all humanity. And he who has saved one innocent soul, it is as if he has saved all humanity.'

Let each and every one of us follow that better path of active compassion and humanity and in any way we can help bring about a better, more harmonious and peaceful world where it is the welfare, dignity and worth of all that are our common concern, not the selfish accumulation of wealth and power. We recall words addressed to Scrooge and hope against hope that our elected leaders will heed them:

'Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business: charity, mercy, forbearance and benevolence were all my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business...'

At this Christmastide let us honour all those benevolent humanitarian individuals who have lived these essentially religious precepts.

This Christmas may we do likewise, in the spirit of our 2016 GA resolution by supporting the Clara Barton Red Cross Syrian emergency appeal and show our spiritual values not in words but in life saving deeds.

A happy Christmas and peaceful New Year to all readers of *The Inquirer* and, as Tiny Tim observed, 'God bless us, every one!'

The Rev Feergus O'Connor is minister with Golders Green and St Albans Unitarians.

Holidays more essential than ever

Can we stay here forever?

That was just one quote from a child on his last day of a Send a Child to Hucklow week in 2016 and here are some more quotes of what they liked best.

"The cascades because they cooled me down... I liked the caves because we learned lots of knowledge even though we were on holiday... I have learnt not to be scared of heights....We made a rope, fed the animals and learned their names... Elbows don't belong on the table... I would change the climb up the mountain and go to a river!"

In 2016 we ran a record 16 weeks of holidays and children came from Mansfield, Nottingham, Manchester, Birmingham, Accrington (2 groups), Southend, Rotherham and several groups from Liverpool.

On the income side we had a further donation of £6000 from our former Astley Chapel and a novel donation came through the raffling of a cricket ball signed by Joe Root. We also received the fourth £10,000 from the Bowland Trust relating to our 50th anniversary appeal. Every donation, however small, is welcome but large donors have been the Brethren of Notts Conclave 166, the Dagny Raymond Trust, Elliott Masonic



Lodge 8569, the Joseph and Ann Slater Memorial Fund, the Leonard Chamberlain Trust, Provincial Grand Lodge of Nottinghamshire, Royal Ark Mariners Lodge, South Birmingham Friends Institute Trust and the Zochonis Charitable Trust.

One of our Trustees Tom Grimshaw gave all his preaching fees over the year and another Reg Ash of Liverpool not only donated profits from his two books on the Liverpool Domestic Mission but

also celebrated his 90th birthday at our AGM. A third trustee Dr Judith Short created artistic bookfolds for sale at the GA meetings. Our Secretary travels with his 'SACH History Slide-show' and donates any preaching fees on those occasions.

In memoriam donations totalling £3,837 were given in memory of Sylvia & Stan Bateman, Brenda Beales, Elaine Bentley, Mary Burns, Maureen Cassidy, Norman Chart, Anne Eyra, Sheila Farrell, Keith Gilley, Lilian Hodgson, Edward Jones, Joan Kereki, Sheila Latta, June Midgley, John Roberts, David Skelton, Eric Wild, Roddie Wilkie and Rev. Pat Womersley.

Please help us to provide the holidays in 2017.

The Rev Peter Hewis is the chairman of Send a Child to Hucklow. SACH photo

The Send a Child to Hucklow Fund

53 years old and still going strong

Challenged to raise £50,000,

you helped us to raise £55,200 although that included a few special one-off donations.

It's hard to believe that in this day and age some children would not have a holiday if it were not for our fund but that is true. Your generosity helps to provide a holiday for those children and opens up a whole new world for many children, a world removed from mobile phones and computer games!

Thanks to you there were a record 16 holidays in 2016 and as always, the children's descriptions of what the holidays meant to them are deeply moving. **The work goes on, so do please help us to continue giving needy children a country holiday.**

Your gifts for the 2017 holidays will be as deeply appreciated as ever. **Our target is £50,000 for direct donations. It costs approximately £350 per child and we hope to send 200 children.**

Gifts will be gratefully received by the Hon. Assistant Treasurer, Mrs Sue Catts, 8 Woodlands Drive, Beverley, HU17 8BZ. Please note that the Fund can reclaim income tax paid by any individual (as long as s/he has paid income tax) if a Gift Aid Donation form has been signed. A copy of the form is in this issue of *The Inquirer*, or may be obtained from Mrs Catts. Giving with a Gift Aid Donation form makes a gift of £20 worth £25.65 to the Fund. Gifts may now be made very easily on line, in various ways, by going to our website: **www.sendachildtohucklow.org.uk**

If you shop online, then please use Easyfundraising, naming 'Send-a-Child' as your beneficiary, as we receive a small donation for everything purchased and this year we had £255 from this source. (**www.easyfundraising.org.uk/**)

The Fund is a registered charity, number 271585. All gifts are used for the holidays – except for gifts in someone's memory which are put into a Capital Account with the interest used for holidays. Please remember the Fund in your will. Legacies are a much appreciated and valuable income.

**Copies of the full 2015-16 report and appeal may be obtained from the Hon. Secretary,
Rev Ernest Baker, 145 Tullibardine Road, Sheffield, South Yorks, S11 7GN
Telephone 0114 266 1070.**

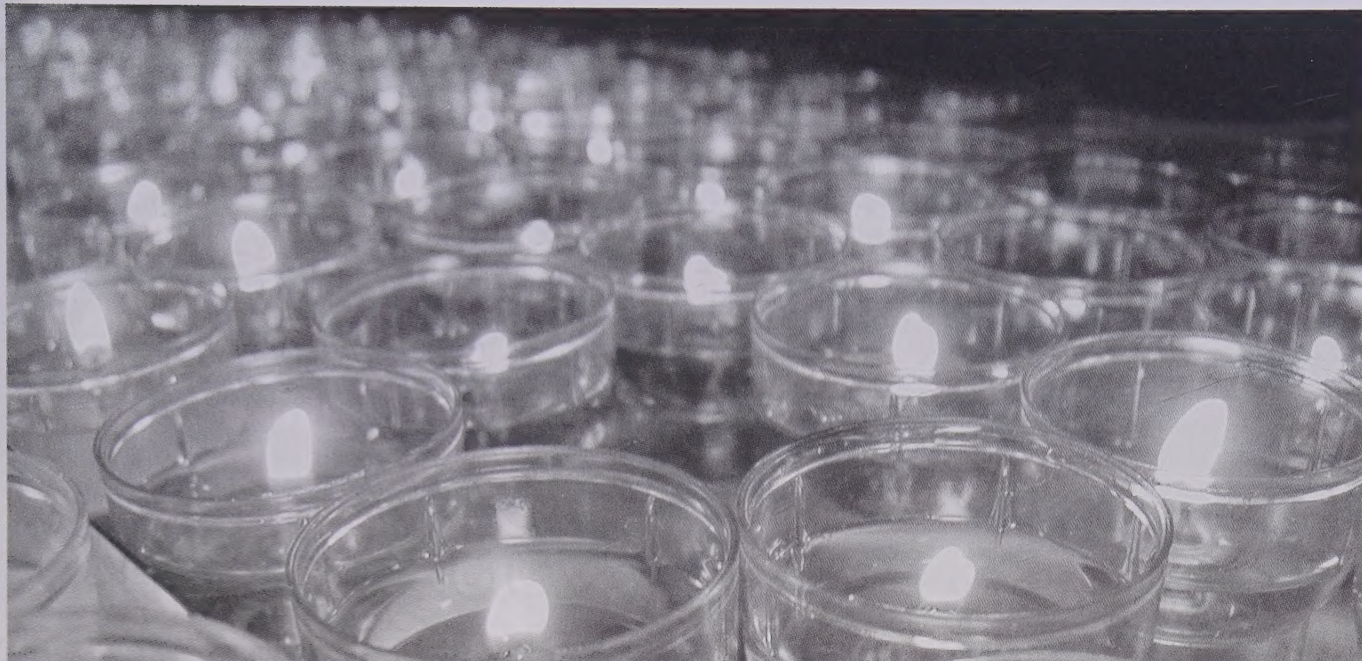


Photo by Carl Dwyer via freeimages.com

We must be the light of our world

By Danny Crosby

It is not difficult to look at the world in despair and cry out, 'There is no hope for humanity'. It is easy to say, 'what is the point? Darkness always overcomes it all.' It is easy to cry out 'there is something deeply flawed in human nature that evil always seems to prevail.' It is so easy to accept those words from the *Book of Common Prayer*, 'That there is no health in us.' It is easy to give up on it all and say, 'It is all going to rack and ruin'.

I've done it myself. In fact it would be fair to say that for many years of my adult life I did just this. I gave up on life and I gave up on humanity. I allowed the light in my own being and in life itself to go out. I gave in. That was the easy way, the heartless way, if truth be told. I had lost the courage to live and the courage to love and had become consumed by despair. But thank God it did not stay that way. From that place of hopelessness, from that place of despair 'Hope' somehow took root once again, light took hold in the dark cold places within my being. I have seen this happen in the lives of many others since. Light can prevail, if we let it. It is not easy though. To live in hope is the harder way. It takes love and it takes courage... To live in the way of love and life takes heart...

Now of course sometimes the light is lit by another. As Albert Schweitzer said, 'At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lit the flame within us'.

There are many who have rekindled the spark in me over the years. I hope that I've done it in lives of others too.

It has been through experiencing the light once more coming on, and witnessing it in the lives of others, that keeps the fire of hope burning deep within me. We human beings are capable of incredible acts of love and compassion. I see this every day in my personal interactions and I also see it on a global level in the way that we do respond to the horrors and crisis that we witness in our lives both locally and globally. We humans are capable of such goodness. The key is to believe and to bring that belief to fruition that we are capable of deep caring as well as destructive aggression;

that we are just as capable of good as we are of evil.

By the way I mean all of us, not just some of us. I believe we are formed from Divine love and we have a Divine spark that created the beginning of all life within us; that we are all formed from that Original Goodness; that we all have that same stardust within us. Our problem is that we have forgotten this and/or rejected it. When we do this we turn from a love for all life into a rejection and hatred of life itself. To me this is where the darkness, the evil in life comes from. From rejecting life and the love from which we are all formed. ...The darkness grows when we fail to recognise that we are the light of the world...

It is our task to rekindle that loving flame within us. It is our task to become the Immanuels, the ones that the world has been waiting for. Not to wait for some figure to come and rescue humanity, but to become those people, to let love incarnate within us and through us. To bear witness to the fact that God is already with us, in our hearts and souls and to bring that love to life. We must become the Immanuels, the ones we have all been waiting for. It is so easy to sink into despair and say there is no hope for humanity.

But is it true? I don't think so, but it is up to us. There is no point waiting for something to happen. We must become the saviours of our world and it begins in our own hearts and minds; in our own families and in our own communities. And then it may begin to spread throughout the whole world. It is our task to bring the spirit of love alive in our lives and in our times and places. It is our task to become the Immanuels. ...We must become the light of the world...

We can build temples of hope in all our hearts, in spite of the despair that we see within our own lives and those all around us. We can bring love alive once more. We can light the flame within us and rekindle the flame in those who need it the most, who feel close to giving up and are consumed by despair. We can become the blessing that our world has been waiting for. ...We can become the light of the world...

Danny Crosby is minister at Urmston and Altrincham.

1914: Unitarian women sought peace

By Ann Peart

By November 1914 women campaigning for their right to vote were divided on whether to support Britain's participation in the World War, or to oppose violence and work for peace. Unitarian women were on both sides of this split.

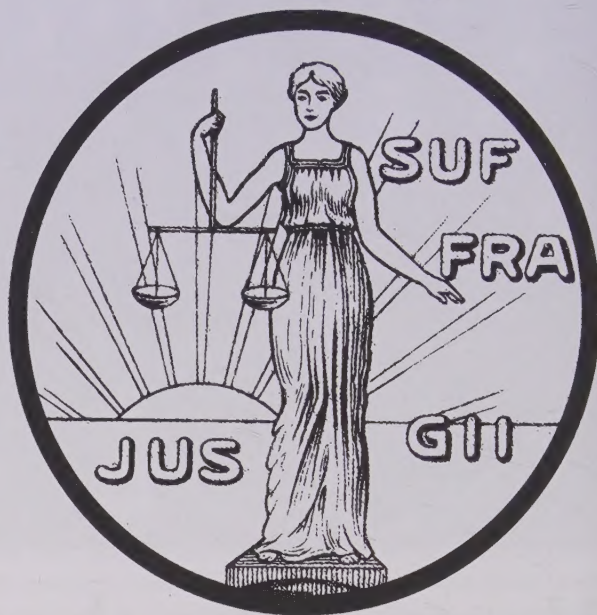
In the autumn of 1914 *Jus Suffragii*, the London based journal of the International Women's Suffrage Alliance published several letters from German women's suffrage activists addressed 'to the women of all nations' sending 'hearty greetings in these wretched and bloody times' expressing the wish that women would not be divided by the hostilities, and for them not to forget their previous unity 'striving for the highest object – personal and political freedom'. This was taken up by Emily Hobhouse, a British woman who had done much to expose the harsh conditions in the concentration camps run by Britain during the second Boer War. Hobhouse, an Anglican, composed an open letter to German and Austrian women, and arranged for it to be signed by 101 British women. This was taken up enthusiastically by suffragists in Manchester, so much so that the letter is documented as coming from the 'Suffragettes of Manchester', though it was signed by a wide variety of women from various parts of the country.

Amongst the signatories I have so far identified several Unitarian women, the most prominent of which is Margaret Ashton who came from the wealthy cotton manufacturing family of Hyde, and lived most of her life in south Manchester. In 1908 she became the first woman elected on to the Manchester City Council, giving her opportunity to serve on the education and maternity and child welfare committees. She was a committed pacifist; once war began this led to her being removed from the education committee as 'a traitor to your country', unfit to influence children. During the First World War she was active in women's peace campaigning, being associated with the Women's Peace Crusade and a founder member of what became the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF).

Other Unitarian women who signed the letter include Margaret Brackenbury Crook a suffragist, who left her ministry training at Manchester College, Oxford, firstly to attend court hearings for conscientious objectors, and then to work with the Friends War Relief Committee in Northern France. She sent accounts of her experiences to the *Manchester Guardian*, though these were carefully written to exclude any information about the actual fighting. After



Margaret Ashton at the Duchess of York Hospital for babies. Photo from Wellcome Library, London



The masthead of *Jus Suffragii*. Via Wikimedia Commons

the war she completed her ministry training and served the congregation at Norwich, before moving to America for family reasons. Here she served as the American secretary of WILPF. Her mother, Ellen Crook also signed the letter, as did Annie Beard Woodhouse, who at the time was a member of the Knutsford women's suffrage society, and went on to be an influential member of the Women's League and supporter of Margaret Barr's work with the Unitarians of the Khasi Hills in North East India. Laura G Ackroyde may not have called herself Unitarian, but she was closely associated with the movement as sub-editor of *The Inquirer*.

The full text of the letter can be accessed at: <http://bit.ly/2fkqISQ>. It affirms the womanly mission to preserve life, and work to 'stay further bloodshed'. It continues 'Though our sons are sent to slay each other ... we will let no bitterness enter into this tragedy ... Though much has been done on all sides you will, as deeply as ourselves, deplore, shall we steadily refuse to give credence to those false tales so freely told us, each of the other?' It gives assurance that the British women are working for the welfare of German civilians and war prisoners in the UK, and continues, 'Relief, however colossal, can reach but few. Can we sit still and let the helpless die in their thousands, as die they must – unless we rouse ourselves in the name of Humanity to save them?' It ends by urging that peace be made, and its closing words are, 'We are yours in this sisterhood of sorrow'.

As direct communication with Germany was prohibited, this letter was published in *Jus Suffragii* in December 1914, and a reply signed by 155 German women appeared in the following spring. It began, 'To our English sisters, sisters of the same human race, we express in the name of many German women our warm and heartfelt thanks for their Christmas greeting, which we only heard of lately.' It continued, 'This message was a confirmation of what we foresaw – that women of the belligerent countries, with all faithfulness, devotion and love to their country, can go beyond it and maintain true solidarity with the women of other belligerent nations, and that really civilised women never lose their humanity'.

The Rev Dr Ann Peart is a retired Unitarian minister.

2016: GA president wears white poppy

By Dot Hewerdine

I knew I would have a busy year as President of the General Assembly, but wasn't, perhaps, prepared for just how busy I would be! Note to future would-be Presidents, make sure you drop some of your regular commitments, at least temporarily, to allow more time for preparation of worship, speeches, workshops and meetings. And don't forget the time required for administration including, for instance, researching and booking travel!

Seriously, I am enjoying my year of travelling around the country visiting our communities all over the UK. I have attended and participated in many events, apart from leading worship, including two Valedictory Services and a number of Inductions of Ministers. Everywhere I go I am welcomed with warmth and generous hospitality. This has done nothing for my waistline but I have really appreciated the thoughtfulness and care of my hosts.

As I write this just a few days after representing the GA at the Service of Remembrance at The Cenotaph in London, I want to focus on that in this column.

It was a great privilege to be at The Cenotaph alongside other faith leaders, politicians, foreign dignitaries, members of the armed and civilian forces and members of the royal family. It was a moving and inspiring experience as the two-minute silence stilled all but the birdsong. The laying of wreaths, initially also in silence, the short service and the boisterous singing of the National Anthem by the people just behind me who had gathered to watch the ceremony, resulted in a complexity of emotions ranging from grief at the horror of war, compassion for those affected by conflict, to hope for a future where peace can become a reality.

My husband, John watched from a balcony with other guests. We both found inspiration in conversations we had with 'ordinary' people who came to London to remember those affected



Dot Hewerdine, wearing a red and a white poppy at Trafalgar Square after attending the wreath laying at the Cenotaph. Photo by John Hewerdine

by conflict with an underlying determination to work towards peace. We met people in Trafalgar Square, The Mall, in cafes and in the 'Poppy Taxis' transporting people to and from the Cenotaph, free of charge. A fleet of 500 taxis offered this service as their way of supporting those affected by war. I wasn't expecting that and was very moved when approached outside our hotel by the leader of a fleet of taxis waiting there!

Many of our conversations began with comments about the white poppies we both wore alongside our red poppies. Several people said they wished they'd had a white poppy too. No one challenged me to take off the white poppy as I processed onto Whitehall. For me, wearing both red and white poppies signified the need to remember the atrocities of war and commemorate all those who have suffered because of conflict in order to inspire and motivate a continuing commitment to supporting non-violent processes. I know there are other poppies too including for animals (purple), and for everyone including conscientious objectors (black). Maybe our next president will add to the two we wore.

During the time before and immediately after the service we were privileged to be in the company of other guests. For me this wasn't a day to 'noble a politician' as some people did very energetically! The quiet conversations with other faith leaders and their guests brought home to me how much we have in common and how much we could achieve if we work together.

All too soon it was over and we emerged into a beautiful autumn day to reflect on our experiences and how we will remember and be inspired by them in the future.

Dot Hewerdine is president of the General Assembly of Unitarians and Free Christians.



Dot Hewerdine represents Unitarians among religious leaders at the Cenotaph wreath laying. She is in the second row, back to the camera fifth in from the right. Photo by John Hewerdine

Advice: Never criticise an editor!

By Peter Godfrey

As an active minister I used to have in my Christmas Day services a series of 'Merry Christmas' wishes. Every year, before the service, I wondered whether it was right to be extending 'Merry Christmas' wishes at a time when life was so terrible for many people in the world. Then and now I remember that there are people all over the world devoted to alleviating suffering. There is a wonderful phrase that says, 'When we offer a glass of water to a thirsty person – it is Christmas'.

Always my first 'Merry Christmas' is to the world's peacemakers. In the words of him whose birthday we are about to celebrate: 'Blessed are the peacemakers, they are children of God'. US ex-President Jimmy Carter said that 'War is synonymous with murdering one another's children'.

So, a *Merry Christmas* to the unselfish, self-sacrificing, people who are giving their lives to relieve suffering. I believe a crucial Christmas message is 'Don't despair'. As Paul said – 'Weary not in well-doing'. Think of the story of two people walking on a beach on which many fish have been thrown floundering by a big wave. One person starts to throw them back and the other says 'With all these hundreds of fish that doesn't matter much', and the first person said, as he threw another fish back – 'It matters to that one'.

As Unitarians we can help the Women's League Annual Project, the Peace Fellowship Lent Appeal, the Clara Barton Red Cross Fund, the Send a Child to Hucklow Fund, or Bethnal Green's Simple Gifts.

Remember – with an annual income of over £200 a year you are better off than half the world. Even if you are particularly hard-up just being kind can be a very valuable gift.

A *Merry Christmas* to people who are kind to children. Cruelty to children is desperately sad and it is far too common.

A *Merry Christmas* to all who work with children, teachers and social workers: difficult jobs and it is far too easy to judge them when they make mistakes.

A *Merry Christmas* to all children – they often bring us joy.

A *Merry Christmas* to parents and grandparents who have enjoyed seeing children in nativity plays. John Storey told about a little boy who was very upset at being chosen to be the innkeeper and not Joseph. When he was asked by Mary and Joseph 'Is there any room in the inn?' he replied – 'Yes, lots; come in'. When one of the little shepherds got to the crib he said 'Isn't he like his father'.

A *Merry Christmas* to all newly weds. Sociologists once made an astounding discovery: couples who remain faithful to one another have the longest and happiest marriages. Who would have thought it! It reminds me of the father who was trying



to tell his daughter, aged 4 or 5, what 'marriage' meant. Having difficulty, he had a brainwave and showed his daughter the wedding photographs. 'Now do you understand?' 'Yes – it's the day Mummy came to work for us'.

A *Merry Christmas* to everyone on a diet at this particular time of the year. Remember – he who indulges, bulges! And – 'money talks but

chocolate sings'!

A *Merry Christmas* to all editors, especially, of course, to the editor of our denominational paper 'The Inquirer', but to all our editors right down to the smallest church newsletter. I edited *Faith and Freedom* for 20 years and *The Unitarian* for 17 years and I learnt one thing above all – never criticise an editor.

As *Merry a Christmas* as possible to politicians. May they be reminded that what the world needs most is interdependence – the strengthening of unions and not their breaking up. One of the most horrible things I saw on TV this year was the man who was to become President Elect of the USA mockingly mimicking a disabled journalist who had tried to ask some awkward questions.

A *Merry Christmas* to our postwomen and men. I am inclined to be understanding about having to go to the sorting office twice and then pay postage and £1 handling charge to pick up unstamped Christmas cards. There is a moral dilemma here – do we tell the sender or just give them funny looks for the rest of the year?

A *Merry Christmas* to the inventor of self-sticking stamps!!

A *Merry Christmas* to all who bring light and joy in the form of drama, novels, poetry, song and music, and to our organists and pianists for their music all through the year.

A *Merry Christmas* to the faithful ministers, members and friends of all our churches, chapels and meeting houses who keep alight the beacon of our Unitarian free religious faith – so vital in a world that has so much darkness.

A *Merry Christmas* to those attending Christmas services. May the special worship and shared fellowship remind us of the power revealed in Jesus ('He went about doing good') – and in all good men and women. The power to be loving, kind, unselfish and forgiving.

May Christmas services and fellowship, beautiful music, Christmas decorations give us strength, inspiration and encouragement to use these gifts of the Spirit throughout the whole year in the spirit that guided Jesus whose birthday we joyfully and gratefully celebrate.

Peter Godfrey is a retired Unitarian minister.

A spot of green in the forest is hope

By Martin Gienke

This is a time that occurs once a year, every year. It's the time that is the barest; that bleak time when all we can look forward to are the harsh winter's cold, short gloomy days and lengthy nights of darkness. At this time nature has been stripped of her rich foliage covering. The little forms of life have hibernated. The earth is hard and the air without warmth.

Through this time of desolate, dark silence, sounds the bell of mankind, shines the light of mankind and flows the love of mankind. We step outside. Leafless trees stand as if dead after a long lustrous summer of life. Lost is the touch of any hint of warmth in the air. The ground beneath is frozen stiff, firm and still. We shiver with happiness at the start of the snowfall. This white cover, over everything dead, without footprint or mark gives us the hope of purity in a time when the world is marked, scarred and infected; a hope that eventually honesty and peace will cover our world.

We strain to listen to hear the sounds of bells, chimes and choruses of carollers that cut through the cold, quiet air. While nature is mute, mankind sings forth with joyous sounds, not as a remembrance of joys past, but again as a hope; a hope that soon nature will also sing joyous songs.

We look through the forest of dead branches, naked trees and still see one that maintains its richness of green. It has withstood the bitter, icy blast. We cut it and cart it home as yet another hope. As we looked through the forest and found a bit of green, we also hope that we may see a bit of goodness in our world that is likewise barren and feigning death.

As we approach the door a candle burns in the window. It stands alone so bright in the darkness of the winter. Even nature's opaque attempts cannot put out the light of mankind. Inside with many candles and lights we play and frolic as if it were day; for a few months earlier at this time it was light and warm. Again we hope that days will return with an abundance of light. With our glowing candles we extend nature's precious warmth that she has withdrawn from us for this season.

With the tree, and the house filled with joy and light, stories of magic reindeer, elves and presents dance about the room. With the most magnificent scenery, music and costumes, they turn round about, a special ballet for the children. The leader of this choreography of tales is a jolly old man with a beard dipped in snow and a belt with three extra notches. He is old in years, but still with a twinkle of youth gives all he has done the past year to the children. So does the year behind us present the hope for a new year.

Soon gifts surround the tree ready to have their bright wrapping strewn around the room revealing the love of one person for another. Children can't contain themselves, waiting to open the gifts. Givers can't wait to see the look on the faces of the recipients as they realize the person behind the gift.



Photo by Neville Kenyon

Where all the year past they have wrangled and fought, they have seen corruption and meanness, now, through these tokens they are reassured of love in the world.

Throughout this is woven the story of a birth of a babe. Running alongside this too is the birth of a new year, one that will take two or three hard months of growing up. But soon we will see it mature again into spring. The air will turn warm, songs of birds will be heard, and beauty will surround us.

This Christmas may be in the winter of nature. However, it is now the spring of mankind. For even as nature is cold and desolate, mankind is born. Mankind creates, without the aid of the now-dying world, hopes for purity, joy, goodness, warmth, light, youth and, most of all, love.

*In the corrupt we create purity
In the silence we make music
Out of the ugly we form beauty
In the dark we hold a light
In our old age we find youth
Amongst contempt we find love
This is our time.
This is Christmas*

Martin Gienke is a Unitarian Worship leader.

Sharing the treasures of our faiths

Jim Corrigall gave this address at a joint Nativity service with Sufi Muslims held at Padiham Unitarian Chapel.

Nativity stories in the New Testament occur in only two of the Gospels – in *Matthew* and *Luke*. And the two nativity stories in these two gospels are very different.

So are these stories accounts of real, factual events, or are they *myths* that surround the birth of Jesus? The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, created a stir a few years ago when he said the nativity stories are, in reality, mythical.

But of course *myth* can contain great truth: truths about ourselves, about the human condition, about our relationship with the Divine. So however we see the nativity stories, the most important question to ask about them may well be: what do these stories mean? And if we look at the account in *Matthew* (2: 1-12), we find a story rich in meaning.

After Jesus' birth, we are told, wise men from the East arrived in Jerusalem, seeking the child who'd been born 'King of the Jews' – they'd been following a star from the East, and had come to pay homage to the baby king.

When King Herod hears this, he is frightened and alarmed – he bids the wise men continue their journey, but says they should return and tell him the whereabouts of this new king. So they follow the star, on to Bethlehem, and finding Jesus, pay homage with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. But to avoid King Herod, they return by another road.

Now King Herod becomes infuriated when he finds out they have evaded him. He orders that all boys aged 2 and under, in and around Bethlehem, should be killed. But Joseph has been warned in a dream, and he, Mary and Baby Jesus escape to Egypt, where they remain until danger passes – coming back later, but this time to live in the north, in Nazareth in Galilee, where Jesus grows up.

So, what meanings can we draw from this account? What lessons does it hold for us?

Matthew is clearly indicating that the message of Jesus is for the whole world, for all people. This is signalled by the wise men, mystics coming from the East to pay homage to the new king of the Jews. There's no suggestion that Jesus' message is going to be an exclusive one, and there's no suggestion the magi have been converted to Judaism – or to a new faith, for that matter.

Rather – and this is particularly relevant for inter-faith activities – we are being shown how different faiths can relate to one another: with respect, with joy, by the sharing of gifts, the sharing of the treasures of our faiths. This is what this story of the magi reveals to us.

And what about the flight to Egypt by Joseph and Mary and the baby Jesus? Here, people of another faith and nation give these strangers, these refugees, welcome and succour. They



Illustration by John Pickering

show true hospitality. Once again, are we not being shown how we should treat others? – how we should treat the stranger, the outsider, the refugee?

I think we are being shown ways of welcome and sharing, ways that build trust and peace between people – and 'peace on Earth' is one of the central messages of the Christian Nativity. So why isn't there peace on Earth today – 2,000 years later? What's God been up to all this time?

Isn't this partly the lesson from Herod's brutality? The fact that a new light has been born in the world, the Christ-child, does not mean that all the evil in the world has been banished. Far from it. Herod represents the ruthlessness of the frightened tyrant who uses extreme violence to stay in power, a familiar story then, a familiar story today 2,000 years on. Violence and terror remain part of our world. We see this all around.

So is there more we can learn from this gospel story? Well, consider the symbolism of the flight to Egypt by Joseph and his family, and their later return. It echoes the earlier flight of the Jews to Egypt and their return, led by Moses, recounted in the first two books of the Bible, *Genesis* and *Exodus*.

Moses brought the law to us – God's law – in the Ten Commandments. Matthew is to show Jesus as a new Messiah, a new lawgiver. Jesus will affirm the Ten Commandments, but he will go further. This new Messiah will teach us to welcome and embrace the stranger, to share our spiritual riches with people of other faiths, and, above all, to love, not just our friends, but our enemies too. Jesus will teach: 'Love your enemies, do good to them that hate you'.

We still live in a world of violence because we have not managed to live by this commandment of Jesus – so simple, yet so hard to achieve. To live by this teaching is the great challenge that faces each of us still, and it faces us most directly at Christmas when we celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Christ who revealed God's way to us.

We ask that we may learn to live by it this Christmas.

The Rev Jim Corrigall is Unitarian Minister to the Lancashire Collaborative Ministry and the congregations of Padiham and Rawtenstall.

How to have a *perfect* Christmas

By Bridget Spain

Many of us will spend the coming weeks shopping for gifts and purchasing the mountains of food we feel we need to celebrate Christmas. Shopping will be done with a mind distracted by a list of household chores. There is food to prepare, housework to do, gifts to wrap. It's an endless chore list. When Christmas finally arrives, our frayed nerves can make it an anti-climax.

There is any amount of advice available to help you with your Christmas preparations; radio, television, newspapers and magazines all have tips articles like '10 tips to ensure the perfect Christmas Celebration'. Don't read them! If you can't resist the temptation, don't – for heavens sake – take them seriously. If you follow them, you are pressurising yourself to meet someone else's standard – and you are guaranteed to end up feeling inadequate.

We expect our frantic preparations will add fireworks or extra excitement to the day. We believe the more effort we expend, the happier the day will be. If we get the preparations right, the house will be perfectly clean, the decorations will be this season's must-have colour, the pastry and the mulled wine will be perfect, then happiness and contentment will surely follow.

But, the truth is, a really happy Christmas is a simple one.

I love Christmas, and I believe in celebrating it. In fact, I believe we need to celebrate it. We are responding to a deep call within our nature. This may be the end of 2016. Humanity may have made great technological discoveries. But as human beings we are still closely connected to nature. We remain deeply influenced by the change of seasons and the Winter Solstice, with its limited sunlit days, resonates within our deepest selves.

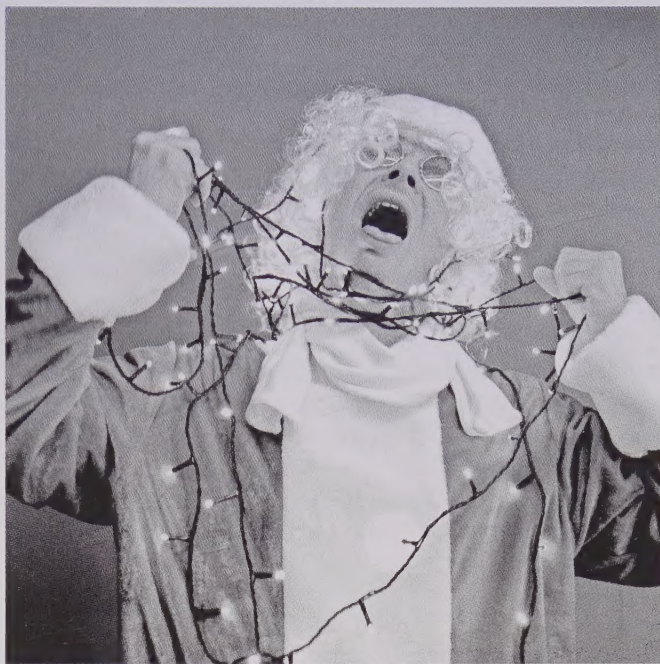
We know the Christian feast was superimposed on celebrations of the Winter Solstice. And, it is no coincidence that Christmas is aligned with the ancient Jewish celebration of Hanukkah – also a festival of lights. Light and family are at the centre of them all.

So here are *my* tips for a Magical Christmas.

1) Minimise (or preferably eliminate) housework. Delegate cooking and other tasks – make them a family effort. Put on Christmas music and sing along in tune, or out of tune. It doesn't matter. Get the children to decorate the tree. Let them ice the cake. It won't matter if the ornaments or the icing are not evenly spread. Delegating work will give the children fun and give you time to have fun.

2) Renew your connection with nature. Wrap up and go walk among grass and trees, birds and wildlife – well away from shops. Take time to notice everything around you. Winter is a great time to appreciate trees. Look at how the branches divide from the trunk evenly so that the tree doesn't topple over. Admire the sturdy leaves still clinging to the branches so they now resemble Christmas decorations. Notice the variation in the bark – rough and smooth. Some seem to peel away. Some are dull. Others are polished and shiny. Smell the wonderful pine of the Christmas tree. If it comes, look at the beautiful white frost. Put food out for the birds and pause to watch them enjoy it. Make a date to watch the dawn and the sunset; the colours in the sky are amazing. Feel the stillness in nature.

3) Make sure you get to see the traditional Christmas films – the ones that are shown every year – 'A Christmas Carol', 'The Sound of Music' – whichever you chose make it senti-



Decorating can be fun – if you delegate! Photo by Klaus Hausmann via Pixabay.

mental, a moral tale with a happy ending. (My personal recommendation is the Muppets' version of Dickens' 'A Christmas Carol'. It always cheers me.) Eat chocolates during the film, and do it without any trace of guilt.

4) If at all possible, spend time in the company of young children. Join in their games. Take out the old board games – Snakes and Ladders, Operation, Guess Who and Ludo. Play charades and get the children to put on a play. Give the young people in your life the gift of your time. This is the most precious gift. Playing with your children will give them memories they will treasure for all time.

Around Christmas one year, I phoned a member of my congregation. He was in a hurry to finish the conversation because he was busy making a costume to entertain his grandchildren. He intended to dress himself up as a grandfather clock and he was having difficulty in getting his pendulum to swing! Now, that is an excellent way to prepare for Christmas. That is having your priorities in the correct order.

5) Set aside some time – even 10 minutes every day – to be still, and simply be. Tune in to stillness and quiet. Take time to meditate, or pray, or reread the nativity story. Read it not as theology, but as a beautiful story of hope, renewal and magic. The birth of every child is magical, miraculous and renews our hope in the future.

In the last few days before Christmas enjoy every moment of every day. Laugh and have fun. Share your good fortune with others. Give as generously as you can. Reach out and recognise the good and the God in each one around you. Count your blessings and give thanks.

I used to dislike the dark days of Winter- every Christmas night I used to say 'Great, the days are getting longer'. Some years ago I decided to look for positive things about winter and I found the list is endless.

May all your preparations for Christmas Day be joyful, may you and all you hold dear enjoy a blessed Christmas Celebration.

The Rev Bridget Spain is minster with Dublin Unitarians.

ELECTION TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

CALL FOR NOMINATIONS AND FURTHER INFORMATION

Nominations are sought for the Executive Committee of the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches. There are six vacancies.

Candidates must be Full, Honorary or Associate members of the General Assembly or a member of a constituent congregation for whom a quota has been paid by their congregation. They should not be a student in training for the Unitarian ministry, a close family member of anyone employed by the GA, or connected professionally with Popularis. Requirements for the position are set out below.

Members wishing to nominate themselves for election to the Executive Committee should contact Popularis Ltd, Nutsey Lane, Totton, Southampton SO40 3RL : 02380 867335 Email: annehock@popularis.org on or after **Monday 5 December 2016. Nominations close 5.00pm on Monday 23 January 2017.**

Popularis will send appropriate documents to candidates by email or by post. Nomination sheets must be countersigned by an official of a Unitarian congregation(s) or organisation supporting the nomination. The congregation(s) must comprise ten or more quota members. Forms should be returned to Popularis by 5.00pm on 23 January 2017.

Further information is available on the General Assembly website. www.unitarian.org.uk or from Derek McAuley, Chief Officer at Essex Hall. Details of the election process will also be sent to secretaries of all congregations and districts.

REQUIREMENTS FOR EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

Candidates should:

- Demonstrate 3 years active commitment to the Unitarian community
- Be in sympathy with the Objects of the General Assembly
- Be eligible to stand in accordance with legal requirements

Essential Requirements

(1) Experience in one of other of the following:

- An officer or member of a congregational/district governing body.
- An officer or member of a committee of an affiliated body.
- An officer or member of a charity trustee body or similar eg voluntary organisations such as a sports club or parent teacher association. As a Minister, Lay Pastor or Lay Person in Charge of a Unitarian congregation

(2) Good understanding of the Unitarian community

(3) Confidentiality

Desirable attributes include any or all of the following:

- Leadership
- Strategy development
- Communication skills
- Decision making
- Representation
- Financial awareness
- Team working

ELECTION SUPERVISION

Popularis Ltd, Independent Election Supervisor, Nutsey Lane, Totton, Southampton SO40 3RL Tel: 02380 867335 Email: annehock@popularis.org have again been chosen to run the election.

TIMETABLE

5 December 2016	Nominations open (7 weeks for nominations)
23 January 2017	Nominations close
6 February 2017	Information Booklet and ballot papers sent out
13 February 2017	Election starts (5 weeks voting period)
17 March 2017	Election closes
20 March 2017	Full Result to be announced by Popularis
13 April 2017	New EC takes up office at GA Annual Meetings

ELECTION

If there are six or fewer members nominated they will be deemed to be elected unopposed. The full result, including details of votes cast, will be announced.

The names, backgrounds, personal statements and a recent photograph of those nominated will be published on Uni-news, the GA website and in the Unitarian press. They will also be published in the Candidate Information Booklet to be sent to all voters.

The Candidate Information Booklet and ballot papers will be sent out to Full and Honorary members and to secretaries of all congregations during the week commencing 6 February 2017. Associate members will receive a letter inviting them to request an individual voting paper from Popularis if they are not voting as a member of a congregation.

The voting system will be that agreed for 2014. The total number of votes to be cast by each voting member will equal the number of vacancies – six (6).

Results will be published on Uni-news, the GA website and in the Unitarian press as soon as possible after the election closes.

Electoral Panel

Jill Hudson, Gavin Mason, and Howard Wilkins

1 November 2016



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-Derek McAuley, Chief Officer of The General Assembly of Unitarian & Free Christian Churches

We believe that churches lie at the heart of our communities and that their complex range of properties, ministries and requirements are best understood and serviced by our specialist team.

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We wish you a Merry Christmas



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News in brief

Brighton Unitarians Celebrate Grant



Photo by Tony Mould

Members of Brighton Unitarian Church recently celebrated their successful application to the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) for help with repairs to the church portico. At a reception on 28 October the Mayor of Brighton and Hove, Cllr Pete West, congratulated the church on its contribution to the local community and to Brighton's religious diversity. The church has received an initial grant from the HLF of £14,900. This will pay for specialist investigations needed before more extensive repairs can begin. It will also fund a programme of talks and displays, and a site-specific performance promoting awareness of the church's heritage.

The congregation – some of them resplendent in Regency fashions – were joined by Unitarian General Assembly Chief Officer Derek McCauley and the Rev Martin Whitell, London

District Minister. The Grade 2* listed church was designed by Amos Henry Wilds in the Greek Revival style, popular in Regency Brighton, and completed in 1820.

Speaking at the reception Lay Pastor Jef Jones praised the hard work and commitment of the congregation – especially its fund-raisers and the Portico Repair Group who worked on the application: 'We are doing this because we believe in this church and what it stands for. It is a substantial resource for charities, performers and small businesses in the heart of Brighton. In any one year there are craft fairs, workshops and all kinds of concerts here. Each week our space is used by the kind of community groups that hold our city together. For example Brighton and Hove Gay Men's Chorus meet here each week as does the Carousel Project for people with learning difficulties, and Marijuana Anonymous.'

He went on to say 'And of course this is a much-loved place of worship. In 1793 our founders were expelled from a Baptist Church in Brighton because they would not assent to the doctrine of Original Sin. They believed in human dignity, in freedom of conscience and in the oneness of God. We honour them today with our stewardship of their brave religious vision, and with our commitment to the elegant and spacious temple it inspired.'

– Jef Jones



Brighton Unitarian Church portico

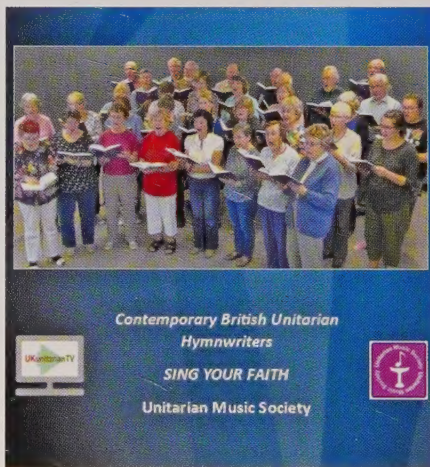
Unitarian Hymn-writers reveal their art

By Nick Morrice

Here is, I believe, a new idea: a DVD of hymns in which the words are given particular prominence. We are so used to the music coming first. But I remember when I used to play the organ at a Christian Science church, the worship leader read out the words of each hymn in full before I played the musical introduction. Perhaps somebody will try this out in a Unitarian service one day.

This DVD is a joint production by UK Unitarian TV and the Unitarian Music Society (UMS) and it spotlights four of our best-known hymn-writers, namely, Lyanne Mitchell, Cliff Reed, Andrew Hill and Peter Sampson. Here, as an example, is the background Cliff Reed gives to his hymn, 'The Flame of Truth is Kindled'. He explains that it was listening to the tune 'Morning Light' being played that gave him the inspiration. He goes on:

'It occurred to me that this wonderful tune deserved a Unitarian hymn to go with it. I had been thinking about the Chalice symbol, so I wrote these words to express the ways in which the flaming chalice is a symbol of what we stand for as Unitarians and Free Christians: freedom of conscience and freedom of thought, the living heritage that we have inherited from our predecessors, the oneness of humankind, of the individual human being and of the divine, and so on. I thought



this hymn was suitable to accompany the lighting of the chalice as worship opens, making a clear statement of why we were there.'

What a difference this makes to our understanding! The film then shows members of UMS singing the hymn, and the words come up on the screen for us to follow.

A similar format is used for Lyanne's 'Spirit of Earth', Andrew's 'Dancing Sweet Heart' and Peter's 'Strong and Steadfast', among others. It is a fascinating approach which takes you into the writer's mind, explaining the origin of

their inspiration and the thought-process behind each hymn. This is a well-produced DVD (it lasts almost 30 minutes) and I am sure could be used as the basis for worship material in our churches. It is also a welcome reminder that 'the words come first'.

To obtain a copy in time for Christmas, contact:

Joan Wilkinson, 10 Shirley Close, Castle Donington, Derby, DE74 2XB. Tel: 01332 814055. Email: joan@yorkshiregirl.org.uk. Cost £6.00 (Inc. p&p) Cheques made payable to: UK Unitarian TV or by bank transfer to: Ac No 32258143 Sort Code 60-12-30

Nick Morrice is a member of the UMS.